

Women's Suffrage

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Women's suffrage in the United States was a century-long struggle for female enfranchisement. Since colonial times, American women were expected to care for the household and leave politics to the men. Many women wanted to change that. They wanted to participate in government and change what it meant to be a woman in the United States. To that end, women began campaigning for their rights, including the right to vote. Over time, this early women's suffrage movement was supported by other organizations, including those campaigning for abolition and temperance.

Words to Know

Enfranchisement

the act of giving the right to vote

Suffrage

the right to vote

Temperance

the practice of restraining from drinking alcohol

Initial Activities

Women began campaigning for equal rights in the decades leading up to the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865). The first national gathering for women's rights was the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. It was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) and Lucretia Mott (1793–1880). The convention discussed the "social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman." Guests were invited from allied movements, such as the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–1895).

The prospect of women's suffrage was raised during the convention, but it was considered to be too extreme. Nevertheless, women's suffrage became one of the major issues raised in the Declaration of Sentiments, which was the most important document of the Seneca Falls Convention.

In 1850, Stanton met Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906). The two women became lifelong partners in the struggle for women's suffrage.

Meanwhile, the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War interrupted the women's activism, though the movement was later revived after the war concluded.

Rivalries

The women's suffrage movement hit a major roadblock when the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was proposed. This amendment allowed freed black men to vote. Many women's rights

activists objected to this because they wanted the right to vote extended to both genders. They unsuccessfully lobbied Congress to include women in this amendment.

The issue caused a rift within the women's suffrage movement. One side decided to focus on gaining women's suffrage state by state. Stanton and Anthony were the leaders of this faction. They established the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1869. That same year, Lucy Stone (1818–1893) and Henry Blackwell (1825–1909) founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) to support the Fifteenth Amendment. They believed that women's suffrage would not come to pass if this amendment did not push through.

In the meantime, Wyoming became the first state to allow women the right to vote in 1869. Some years later, the women's suffrage movement was further strengthened when Anthony was arrested for voting in the 1872 elections. The resulting trial, *United States v. Susan B. Anthony*, was held a year later. The trial was highly publicized and helped to bring the women's suffrage movement to national attention.

More and more women joined the women's suffrage movement during the late 19th century, bolstering the declining influence of both the NWSA and the AWSA. To take advantage of this renewed interest in women's suffrage, the two organizations combined to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890.

In 1900, Stanton and Anthony stepped down from the leadership of the NAWSA, which was taken over by Carrie Chapman Catt (1859–1947). During her tenure, more states legalized women's suffrage, but the movement had yet to be accepted at the national level. Some years later, another rival organization emerged, the National Women's Party (NWP), established in 1916 by Alice Paul (1885–1977). Unlike the NAWSA, Paul's organization was much more willing to use more public tactics such as picketing and hunger strikes to campaign for suffrage. Both organizations successfully recruited President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) to their cause.

Toward Enfranchisement

Though he was against the cause at first, Wilson eventually began to support the women's suffrage movement with the influence of Catt, whose methods were much less confrontational than Paul's. He became even more supportive of the cause when the United States entered World War I (1914–1918) in 1917. He argued that women's suffrage was important to the war effort because women needed to expand their roles outside of the home. Additionally, he believed that democracy would be better served if it was extended to everyone in the country.

However, it was only after the war ended when women's suffrage was finally approved by Congress in 1920, as the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. With this amendment, women's suffrage was at last implemented at the national level.

Critical Thinking Questions

Critical Thinking Questions

Why did the women's suffrage activists object to the Fifteenth Amendment?

What factors caused the formation of the NAWSA in the late 19th century?

How did the First World War advance the cause of women's suffrage?

Further Reading

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